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Using Storytelling to Hone Language Skills

BY MICHELLE SNIDER

A first glance into the classroom where Phillip Tillery teaches can leave visitors a bit overwhelmed due to the vast array of high-tech equipment wired and ready for access by his students. Some students are working independently at computers while others are immersed in teams at a green screen and motion-capture setup. Various computer programs with myriad graphic images are visibly running while some of the students are recording music or their own voices. The initial impression is one of a classroom of students working on separate and distinct projects totally unrelated to the integration of language arts; however, this would be an inaccurate interpretation of the scene. All of these students are working on the same project concurrently as they employ multimedia to tell their stories while honing their language skills. This article offers a profile of one high school teacher and the challenges and lessons learned as he works to effectively integrate language arts into his curriculum.

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In the Beginning

Any teacher who has successfully married technical and academic skill is intimately familiar with the difficulty this can present. Tillery will be the first to admit the problems encountered during the first few years of integrating storytelling as a teaching technique within his communication technology classes at Timber Creek High School in Orlando, Florida. Over time, his instructional approach changed as he learned from mistakes and gradually added more equipment, software and resources to his program.

Tillery's attempt at integrating storytelling within the curriculum of his school began with cultivating a partnership with the drama teacher and her students. The first assignment was for his level one communication technology students and the drama students to create individual digital-media slideshows with sound, illustrating their future aspirations. Prior to student use of the computers, both instructors lectured on the importance of the stories containing a beginning, middle and end, as well as the following seven elements of storytelling: (1) a point of view; (2) a dramatic question; (3) emotional content; (4) the gift of your voice; (5) the power of the soundtrack; (6) economy; and (7) pacing. An activity known as a Storytelling Circle was subsequently initiated to facilitate student brainstorming. All of the students had been previously instructed on the use of various computer graphics programs and applications; however, the drama students did not possess the same level of computer application skill and literacy as those attending Tillery's class. During the joint project he described it in the following manner:

"I was worried that the drama students would not be able to complete the assignment because of their lack of technical skills, but the drama students were so excited by the assignment that they ended up helping my students with the storytelling aspect, and my students teamed up with them to help with the technical skills needed. "

Both teachers were happy with the results of the student effort.

The Challenges

Tillery made the decision to also integrate storytelling into his level two class comprised of students who were introduced to digital storytelling the prior year. The experience he had gained with the technique, and the acquisition of additional resources, had given him greater confidence in his delivery and the potential results. The only difference now was the exclusion of the teaching partner and her drama students solely due to an unexpected illness precluding her participation. However, this difference had a greater impact than Tillery had expected in both the level one and two classes. He never anticipated difficulties in his continued application of the technique with the new level one class since it was the same lesson that generated such success with the level one students of the preceding year. But the new level one students had trouble with either grasping the technology or with understanding story creation. Additionally, the level two students were not as motivated to integrate storytelling without the collaboration of the drama students.

He was determined to find an effective way of teaching digital storytelling. Beginning with his level two classes, students were gradually learning higher level software applications to create three-dimensional images for a movie based upon their own stories. His advanced students typically enjoyed working with digital media, and learning how to tell a story was perfect class content for their skill sets. However, it was necessary for Tillery to prepare his lower level students for what to expect as they progressed to the next level. He struggled with the dilemma of how to teach the technical and storytelling skills simultaneously while maintaining student motivation.

The Techniques

Tillery made the decision to change his instructional approach by slowing the pace of his lessons and concentrating on quality rather than quantity in his level one class. Student focus was needed to improve computer skills, computer literacy and familiarity with specific graphic software applications before storytelling could be introduced. After several false starts he found two final projects that successfully integrated storytelling while teaching the technical skills needed to progress to the digital format: students creating a portfolio and stories surrounding their aspirations. Student focus on learning the software

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applications prior to the integration of storytelling proved to be the more successful instructional approach, especially for students just beginning to acquire technical skills. Tillery believes the students now "buy into the program more. They have taken ownership, because they want to do it and not because they have to do it."

Since he first integrated language arts into his class content by using storytelling, he has collected student examples from previous years to show how equipment and other resources have contributed to the integration of storytelling. One such example was a textbook that allowed the level two students to acquire the technical skills needed to create 3-D images and incorporate storytelling with greater success. The book comes with a CD of 3-D images used by students to complete a series of tutorials. Each tutorial teaches them how to manipulate the visual aspects of a movie such as the lighting, camera view, timing, and movement of objects. A final project is assigned that incorporates all of the newly acquired skills to develop a story.

Finding a textbook to match the computer skills of Tillery's level three and four students proved to be difficult. To compensate, he compiled resources to match the skills of his students with appropriate computer software. He built a green-screen setup and recently acquired motion-capturing equipment, which only his level four students use. Both level three and four students develop a story using digital media after creating a storyboard to map out the sequence of the scenes. To effectuate student motivation, the beginning idea of a story is provided to the students for their development. In one example, students pretend they are at home in their bedroom or living room. The telephone rings and the student answers. During the course of the phone conversation, the student begins to daydream. The movie scene changes to a location chosen by the participating student. Now it is up to the imagination of the student to fill in the gaps and complete the story, thus honing their language skills.

Differences between the assignments dispensed to level three and four students are based upon their knowledge of software applications and equipment. Within level three classes, students continue to develop their skills using basic geometric construction to build three-dimensional objects and environments such as an airplane, spaceship, planetary system, forest, or people. These objects, or new ones, are subsequently created by the students and integrated into a short animated movie incorporating all of the elements of storytelling. Level four students typically have more foundational skills and are hence given a greater amount of classroom time to develop a movie incorporating storyboarding, film, audio, animation, a green screen, and motion capturing. Tillery commented,

"After a few years of integrating storytelling, this year was the first time that I had all of the technology and software in place. While I was pleased with the results for the first time, I still have more to learn, more on how to effectively use all of the equipment that I now have."

By partnering with the other program-area teachers, Tillery hopes to enrich the areas in which his students are weak. In turn, the partnering students would gain technical skills, knowledge of storytelling, programming skills, and learn how to work

Future Goals

For the upcoming school year, he will begin incorporating gaming and simulation skills into his level two through four communication technology classes. The classes will continue to involve the creation of 3-D images and the integration of storytelling, with the addition of students acquiring interactive programming techniques. These programming techniques require the students to apply various math skills using Boolean functions, logic operations, integers and random number functions, and math operations for common math expressions. Going forward, he plans to incorporate a variety of gaming genres such as adventures, puzzles, role-playing games, sports, and strategies/tactics. However, Tillery is not a programmer, and programming skills are needed to implement game strategy as it relates to a story or plot. Consequently, he plans to partner with a programming teacher and her students to fill this gap in all of his classes. He hopes for a partnering experience as positive as his first with the drama teacher and her class.

For his level three and four communication technology classes, Tillery also has plans to partner with an art teacher and the same drama teacher with whom such success was achieved the first year of program implementation. The art students could offer the storyboarding skills lacking in his students, and the drama students could offer their acting abilities when the students have to perform using the green screen and the motion capturing setup. By partnering with the other program-area teachers, he hopes to enrich the areas in which his students are weak. In turn, the partnering students would gain technical skills, knowledge of storytelling, programming skills, and learn how to work cooperatively.

Lessons Learned

When he first taught his communication-technology classes, Tillery focused solely on teaching the software applications to build moveable, 3-D objects. He then began integrating storytelling elements and techniques to enrich the learning experience for students. An unexpected benefit was the intimate classroom setting created by the students bonding with each other and working cooperatively. Those who were usually quiet and unnoticed within their other classes, or exhibited behavioral problems, portrayed none of these characteristics within the classes. Learning the computer techniques to create stories also provided the students with a vehicle for self-expression. Some students created stories focused on objects or events they had experienced. Tillery exemplified this in the following description:

"One year I had a student who was wheelchair bound and had problems with motor skills. The student expressed himself in a story about what he would do without being confined in a wheelchair. He told a story of how he would use his mind to release himself from his confinement."

Digital storytelling is a way to reach the "millennium generation" who are already using media for a variety of routine activities. However, Tillery learned that there is more to integrating storytelling than teaching its elements and the various supporting software applications in his classes. Successfully marrying technical and academic skills requires innovative instructional approaches as well as the willingness to learn new types of software and equipment.

Incorporating storytelling using digital media allows for a multidisciplinary classroom where students can apply language arts, art and math skills while using real-world technological applications. He said, "I saw the benefits of integrating storytelling to enhance what the students were learning to tie everything together." Students use critical thinking skills such as problem solving, time management, production planning, and organization, which they will later use within any discipline of study. Tillery said, "Keep in mind that, in the future, these students will be in the workforce, and they need to start learning how to think for themselves instead of being told how to solve a problem." T

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